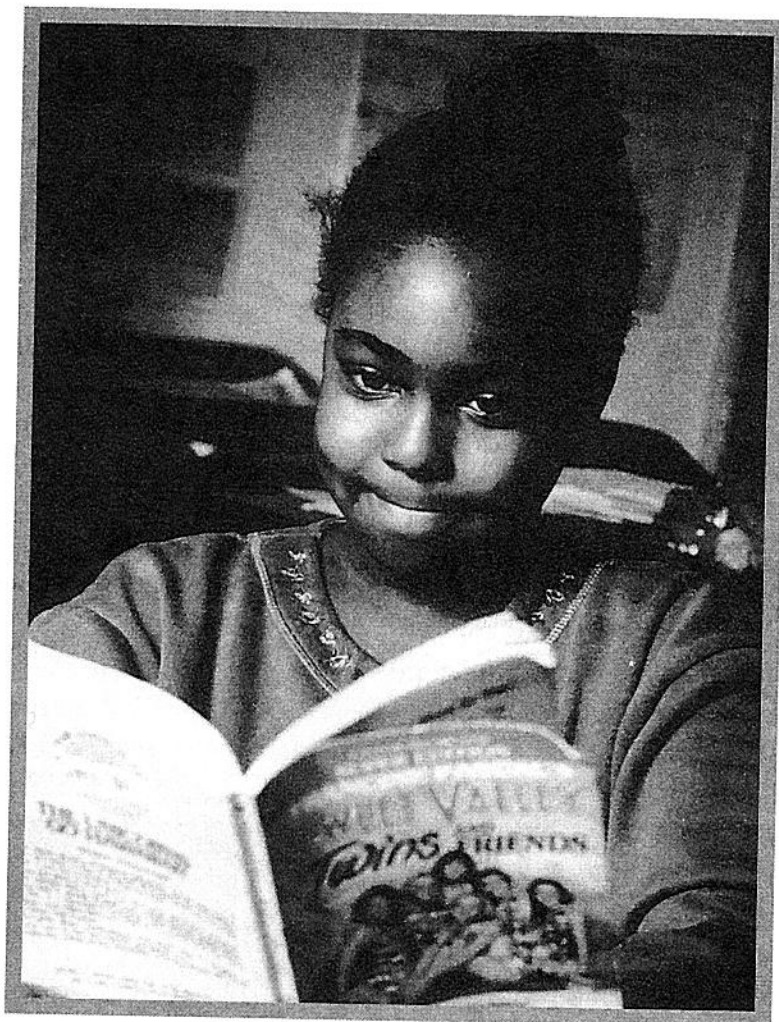


Chapter

3

Creating a Language-rich Environment





After you've chosen an author to study, it's time to consider how you'll create a literate environment that will foster connections between your students and the study you are about to begin. Language-rich environments provide open invitations for students to endlessly explore opportunities to become readers and writers. The value of language is powerfully demonstrated through an environment saturated with meaningful print, including all kinds of books, magazines, student writing, quotes, newspapers, lists, class charts, author information, letters, and more. A classroom library filled with a variety of wonderful books and comfortable settings beckons students to read, listen, talk, and write together.

Teachers and students can create this environment together by gathering resources, creating an author study center, preparing a special place for writing, and extending the environment into the home and school community. More on each of these follows.

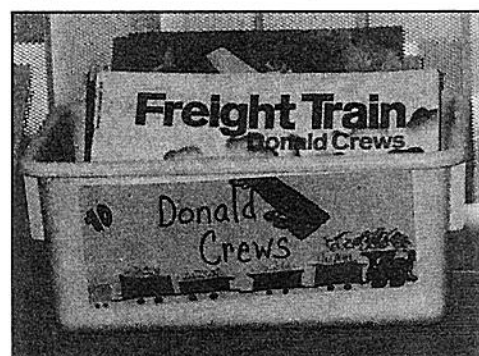
Gathering Resources

COLLECTING BOOKS

As soon as you choose an author but before launching your study, we suggest that you begin to gather books. Knowing the number of books available will help you decide whether to present your study through read alouds, by students reading their own books, or a combination of the two. Possible sources of books include:

Your own classroom library. If you take a good look through the shelves in your classroom library, you might be surprised to find you already have a collection of several books by the same author. Involving students in the search for books gives them opportunities to reexamine and reorganize the class collection, too. Many classes we know have launched an investigation to research the best ways to display their classroom library collections. Trips to school, public, and classroom libraries can suggest possible strategies for organizing and displaying books. Some of the most appealing libraries we've seen have included author baskets, where books by a particular author are displayed along with supporting materials.

Your school library. Most school librarians would be delighted to put together collections of books for author studies.



Several librarians we know even use these requests to guide book orders and build author collections.

Personal book collections. Invite students to check their own book collections at home and to visit local libraries to check out their shelves. This is an opportunity to get parents involved as well. Ask colleagues if they might have some books to lend your class for your author study. It's an opportunity to share what your class is doing. You just might start some interesting discussions—and build professional ties, too. Some schools have launched schoolwide author studies as a result of two teachers getting things going in their own classrooms and sharing with each other.

School book-club orders. One of the easiest and least expensive ways to build up your classroom library and author study collection is to purchase books through the book-club orders your students use. You can exchange bonus points that you accumulate for books. Many book clubs feature books by one author, along with information packets, each month. The prices are reasonable, and you can purchase books for your professional and personal collections through the clubs as well.

Book fairs. Many schools sponsor book fairs throughout the school year. This is an opportunity to purchase books and support schoolwide fund-raising efforts at the same time.

Bookstore trips. A visit to a local book store provides an opportunity to purchase books, as well as investigate how experts lovingly display them. We know schools where groups of teachers arrange for special visits to preview new books and talk with shop owners (and return laden with books they couldn't resist buying to share with their students!). With advance notice, most bookstore owners are eager to accommodate class trips, too. Hopefully, bookstore visits will become a lifelong ritual for all readers.

Flea markets, stoop sales, garage sales. We never pass by one of these sales without checking out the children's books. We've come across some wonderful books to add to our libraries for as little as a quarter.

COLLECTING AUTHOR INFORMATION

Making connections between an author's work and his or her life is an integral part of an author study. Joyful readers know the delight of hearing favorite authors being interviewed on television or reading about them in newspaper articles. Through experiences like these, readers are able to get "inside information" that leads to insight of the author's craft. (For more on sharing author information, see page 40.)





It is important to start collecting information as it comes your way. We urge you to keep files to stay organized, so that when you do decide upon an author to study, you might already have some information handy for your author basket or author study center. In some schools we know, teachers maintain a file system that is accessible to all, in the school libraries and staff resource centers. Other sources of author information include:

Book jackets. A picture of the author, accompanied by a short biographical sketch, is often included on a book jacket. It's not always enough to satisfy curious readers, but it's a taste.

Book-club newsletters. The magazines that enclose the book-club order slips for students are filled with wonderful information and ideas about books, genres, and authors, including interviews with and letters from featured authors. We always clip and add these special pages to our files. Book clubs sometimes offer special author packets that include tapes. Some are even venturing into video interviews. These materials may be available for bonus points or included in orders of certain amounts.

Professional journals. There are several journals that we highly recommend you subscribe to. (For a complete list, see page 144.) These journals are filled with articles about whole language issues and concerns and often review the latest children's books. Fascinating articles written by and about children's authors, illustrators, and other members of the writing profession give us a better understanding of the writer's world. We always add copies of these articles to our author files.

Publishers and bookstores. Most publishers are delighted to send out whatever they can to support your author study and even help you set up author visits. We have received beautiful posters, bookmarks, author biographies, glossy photographs, book jackets, and even sample books from publishers. Check with the children's book publicity departments to see who handles these requests. Bookstores often hand out promotional packets when new books are published, especially when an author is scheduled to appear for a reading and signing session. For publishers' toll-free numbers, call the 800 directory, (800)555-1212, also a no-charge call.)

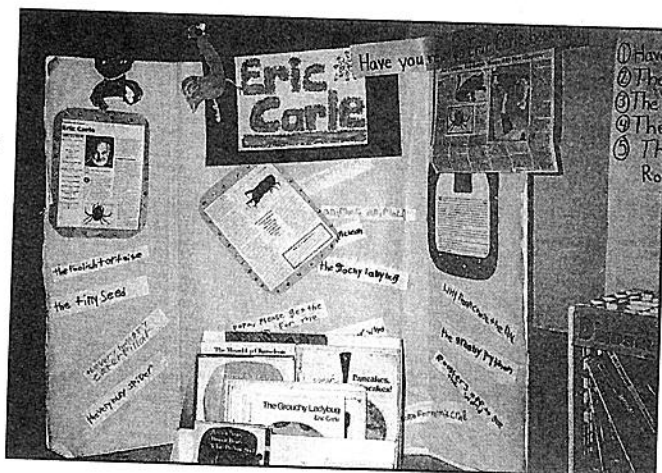
Special books about authors. It's no coincidence that as more and more children learn through an integrated process approach, the need arises for books that also give insight into the craft of writing. It is so wonderful to see that there are more and more books available these days that are specifically about children's book authors. Collections such as *Meet The Authors and*

Illustrators by Deborah Kovaks and James Preller (Scholastic Professional Books) provide background information, inspirational quotes, and tips from well-loved authors and illustrators. In addition, many popular children's book authors and illustrators are publishing memoirs and autobiographies that enhance studies of their work. Start collecting these resources! (For suggested titles, see pages 130–131.)

Author presentations. If you have an opportunity to hear a favorite author speak, don't pass it up. We've had many chances to meet authors at conferences or at bookstore readings and signings and have rarely been disappointed. We bring back pages of notes and delightful anecdotes to share with students and colleagues, connecting authors to books in a powerful way.

Creating an Author Study Center

Finding a special place to display books, biographical information, as well as charts that document discoveries, will encourage and facilitate students' connections to the author. Invite students to help you decide where the best place for this center may be.



A bulletin board featuring the author's picture and biographical information, a clothesline to hang the charts your class will generate, a table with a cloth to beautifully display the author's books, a bookshelf to hold student writing inspired by the author study are all possible ways to demonstrate the important place the author study commands in your classroom. Display students' posters advertising upcoming or ongoing studies outside your classroom to extend the environment and inspire schoolwide interest and enthusiasm.

Creating a Place in the Writing Lives of Our Students

Just as we provide a special place in our classroom for our author study, we also provide a special place in our students' writing lives for the study, enabling them to record ideas, think about research issues, reflect on wonderings and connections, and experiment with the author's style and techniques.

Although class charts will document shared discussions, we also suggest that students, or groups, maintain their own notebooks. There are many ways





to design author study notebooks. A few suggestions follow:

- ⇒ Set aside a special section in the general reading response notebooks.
- ⇒ Create special individual folders, personalized by students, for each author study. Simply fold large sheets of construction paper in half, or provide blank manila file folders. Students can use paper fasteners to add notebook paper, adding or removing pages as the study grows.
- ⇒ Have students purchase a few composition notebooks at the beginning of the school year. One becomes a reading response notebook for independent and group reading, another becomes a writing notebook, and a third is reserved for author studies. As each new author study is launched, students can fold down a page and label it with the author's name, easily creating separate sections.
- ⇒ If you organize response groups during an author study you might use a single folder or notebook for each group, with each student taking a turn as the response entry recorder.

In some classrooms, students keep their notebooks in their desks, while others, organized by groups, create storage baskets to store both notebooks and books. Since there are many options, we suggest you choose the management system that works best for you.

Extending the Environment

One of the most effective ways of enhancing a literary experience is to share it with other readers. In fact, research on peer learning supports the positive value of shared learning for all participants. Author studies provide endless opportunities for shared learning not only within your classroom, but also throughout the school community. Three approaches to extending your learning environment follow.

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INTERCLASS READING BUDDIES

The same considerations we urge teachers to think about when forming classroom partners and groups should be given towards forming interclass reading buddies. Teachers might meet first to discuss matches, with the understanding that changes may have to be made. We recommend keeping partners together for the duration of the collaboration, if possible.

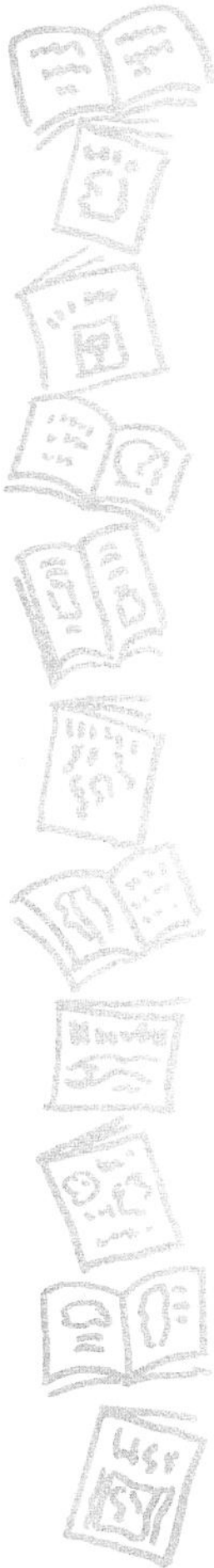
One fifth-grade teacher paired up with a first-grade teacher to form reading buddies between the two classes but encouraged the pairs to meet in groups of four. This way, if a student was absent during an interclass visit, the partner would still be part of a group. Think about the best way to physically accommodate and manage two classes divided up into many pairs. You may want to move to a bigger space, or consider using hallways as additional space. Classes could meet as often as scheduling permits, but we do suggest that the time allotted for the meeting be sufficient to allow for traveling to and fro, leaving enough time in between for students to really get to work together. Plan on at least 45 minutes per session.

Prepare students in both classes for the experience by discussing behavior expectations, active listening skills, interpersonal amenities, and author study activities. It's also a good idea to spend some time in each class, and perhaps together, on getting and giving feedback on how things are working out between partners. You might present mini-lessons at the beginning of a visit to set a focus. Or, students could decide on their own how to spend their time together. It's possible that some buddies will read, some may choose to write an original piece, and others might want to talk about and respond in writing to the books they are sharing. Reading buddies can maintain collaborative response notebooks that can be as simple as filling in date, title, pages read, and signatures of both partners. For more elaborate entries, students can include webs, story maps, and so on. (For more information and ideas on responses, see Chapters 4 and 5.)

SHARING A STUDY

You might consider sharing your author study with another class on the same grade level by inviting the class in to see your display, sit in on read alouds, join in response discussions, and help you celebrate a successful study. Some classes we've worked with design and send invitations to other classes on their grade to attend a student reading of work by the author being studied. Strategies for effective read alouds can be modeled during mini-lessons by both teachers and students. Build fluency and ensure a powerful read aloud by allowing time in class for students to select and practice reading excerpts. You could also begin by having students write letters to peers





telling about their author study. Two classes could even collaborate and form groups across class lines to study the same author or compare discoveries about two different authors.

READING AND WRITING TOGETHER

Students of varied ages enjoy reading to each other, talking about the books, and sharing their writing. It's especially helpful when one of the classes, older or younger, has had some previous author study experiences to share. A sixth-grade Chinese bilingual class studying work by Anthony Browne was captivated by his illustrations and very accessible text. These students were inspired to write their own versions of *Things I Like*. Their teacher arranged for them to meet with a second-grade Chinese bilingual class in the school so that they would have another audience for their writing. The meeting was a success and the classes decided to collaboratively study Eric Carle, a new author for both classes. As students continued to meet, they shared their original writing inspired by Carle's work.

Partnerships like these benefit both students and teachers. Working collaboratively encourages teachers to pool resources such as books and biographical information. In addition, sharing responsibilities allows teachers to observe student interactions and reflect together on their practice. Students benefit by serving as mentors for each other and forming strong connections around books. Entire schools have become caught up in author study excitement that began with a collaboration between two classes.

HOME-SCHOOL CONNECTIONS

Children who are immersed in an exciting author study are often eager to share their discoveries with their families. Their enthusiasm delights and inspires many parents to become involved, strengthening ties between home and school. Because we know parents are an essential resource but, like us, are busy people with varied demands on their time, we offer several ways for them to support a classroom author study. Here are some ideas.

Letters to parents. A letter to parents about an author study builds enthusiasm and excitement and invites parent participation. Some teachers send the letter before the author study begins, while others wait until the study is underway. In either case, the letter gives parents insight into the author study process and encourages their participation. This authentic opportunity for letter-writing allows students to participate in making decisions about what to say and how best to say it. You might send one class-composed letter or individual ones, asking parents to contribute books or a small donation to help purchase books, volunteer time to join author study activities, or help in

follow-up homework assignments. This dialogue may continue throughout the author study and culminate with an invitation to join the author study celebration (See Appendix G.)

Book in a bag. Research shows that children who read at home are likely to become lifelong readers; therefore, homework that helps parents create a daily reading ritual is essential. A ritual many teachers build into author studies is for children to take home a book each night to share and enjoy with their family. Rereading favorite books at home with a family member builds on familiarity and leads to competency and fluency. Depending on books available, you might want to make this a daily or weekly routine. Students can place borrowed books in special bags to ensure their safety and emphasize the importance of the activity. You may want to use large recloseable bags and ask students to design their own name labels. To extend the Book in a Bag concept, you might try these ideas:

❖ Ask students to take their response journals home with the book in a bag. Children can make additional entries at home that record their reactions, wonderings, and connections. Parents and siblings can participate by entering their own reactions in the journal and keeping an ongoing record of shared titles. Children enjoy seeing family members as readers and writers, and the journal becomes a valuable record of family reading time. You can contribute to the dialogue by responding to students and their families with your own entries in the journal. Many teachers begin their day by sharing responses to the Book in a Bag and end their day with children selecting the next book to take home that night. Thus, the day begins and ends with readers talking about books shared with family, a vital part of the community (See Appendices H and I.)

❖ Another ritual that encourages family literacy is inviting families to write letters about their shared reading experiences. You might place an envelope in the back of each book in an author study collection. When children take books home, they can read what other families think about the books and authors and then record their own thoughts. Bind these letters into a book to document the connection between home and school. The book then becomes part of the literate environment (See Appendix J.)

Read-aloud visits. Parents can participate in author studies by volunteering to come to school and read to the class. Students enjoy hearing stories read by different voices, and parents enjoy sharing their love of reading with their children. These visits offer you more opportunities to sit back and observe students with other adults and reflect on what they see and hear. Classrooms are enriched by visits from joyfully literate adults who serve as





role models. Likewise, parents are enriched and impressed by their children's natural exuberance, enthusiasm, and honest responses.

Parent workshops. Another strategy for strengthening bonds between home and school is to offer a series of parent workshops, held at convenient times to accommodate parents' schedules, led by teachers involved in author studies. Many parents will welcome the opportunity to read and talk about books in social groups. Teachers leading these workshops can use the same books that students are studying, as well as the same strategies for connecting these books to readers. The whole group may study one author with smaller groups forming around particular titles. Or parents may form small groups from a menu of book choices.

When parent readers participate in author studies, they become aware of the excitement and power of shared reading. They can't help but bring that energy back home to their families. Moreover, when teachers have the opportunity to lead parent workshops, they have natural reasons for collaborating with other teachers and parents. They find that the experience of leading these workshops forces them to reflect on what they know and believe about teaching and learning, to sharpen and refine their skills, and to reenergize their commitment to their craft. Teachers become empowered when they serve as leaders, in turn empowering parents through their interactions with other adults around shared books.